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ABSTRACT

The stories composition teachers tell their students about "what an essay is" are significant because they affect the work teachers do in the classroom. Questions about these stories, the cultural narratives the stories reflect, and implications for students can be answered through an examination of contemporary writing texts and texts written during the Progressive Era. A core belief held by Progressive intellectuals was that the survival of the nation was dependent on the achievement of a virtuous democracy. Perhaps the most significant story about what an essay is underscoring Progressive composition work comes from Fred Newton Scott's pedagogical scholarship. For Scott, an essay's formal conventions reflected the values that would see the nation through the achievement of a virtuous democracy, yet he wanted the essay to be a form which would allow students to express their "natural" ideas in a "natural" way. Such tensions were reflected in several composition texts co-authored by Scott and Joseph Villiers Denny. Although this tension in stories about what an essay is remains in contemporary composition, Mary Lynch Kennedy, William Kennedy, and Hadley Smith's "Writing in the Disciplines" (WID) and Gary Columbo, Bonnie Lisle, and Sandra Mano's "Frame Work" (FW) treat the story differently than did Progressive books. The approach taken in "WID" is closely aligned with that of Scott and Denny's texts and might perpetuate problems and result in considerable difficulties for some students. But "FW" deals with this tension differently, seemingly trying to relieve it by defining what might be a more accessible story about what the essay is. (RS)

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"Stories Told in School: What an Essay Is in Progressive and Contemporary Composition Texts"

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Here's the story I told students in my winter semester, 1998 first-year composition courses about what an essay is (more or less):

> [Academic language] isn't the only one out there, and in many situations it isn't even the most comfortable one to use to express ideas. For instance, the language in an essay (and the ways it's arranged) is probably different from the way you communicate with different people (your family or friends, for example). This term, we'll talk/write extensively about similarities among/differences between those things. . . . Ultimately, we'll work together to incorporate different kinds of languages into your papers -- academic language, language you use outside of school. We'll also see how we can work within the form (that is, the arrangement) of your essays to work in different forms -- maybe poems, raps, or just descriptions of some experiences you've had. When some people think of what an academic essay is, sometimes they don't include these things.
>
> My hope is that working on all of this will help you make connections between your language and the way that you express yourself, and academic writing. But there's a dilemma here that we'll continue to talk about throughout the term: I want to help you find your own way into the essay, and hopefully nudge the essay a little bit so that it's what you want it to be. But (and here's the dilemma) there are still certain things that you'll need to know to "do" academic writing. So as much as I want this to be your thing, it's still an academic thing, too. Sometimes, this might mean that you have to write things a little differently than you might want to; other times it might mean using slightly different language. This is a tension that runs throughout academic writing, and my hope is that by becoming aware of what it is and why it's there, we'll develop strategies to work with it.

This story shapes the way I teach my composition classes right now (since it *is* winter semester, 1998). As my thinking changes, this story changes with it. It is a composite of several themes which intermingle in my thinking about writing, academic writing, teaching, and learning. From these, I construct this story. So that what I mean is clear, I'll list a few and attach a tag to them indicating where I was when I constructed them – where they come from. From 1991 to 1997 I taught at the University of Minnesota's General College, an institution for students labeled "underprepared;" beginning in 1997 I moved to the University of Michigan-Dearborn, a fairly elite institution whose students are in the top ten percent of their graduating classes (even the basic writers!). They include:

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- academic writing is a form of communication that mediates the existence of the academic community, and therefore reflects the values of that community (GC)
- but that community is constantly shifting, in the manner of Gramsci's and Raymond Williams' conceptions of hegemony (they're closely related and they both imply movement) (GC)
- But academic writing can be something different, as well – or can it? How much can students push on the boundaries of this discourse and still be considered "good" academic writers? (late years at GC and UM-D)
- For students who have mastered the conventions of academic writing, it needs to be something different – something that helps students to explore [beyond] "the limits of their worlds" (where is that quote from?); to develop their analytic abilities and discover what's beyond the conventions/conventional that they know. (UM-D)

As my context changes, so do my stories about what an essay is; as that changes, the ways that I teach composition change, too. And while the purpose of this paper isn't to watch me analyze the stories *I* tell students about what an essay is. But these stories make the point clearly: our individual stories are significant because they affect the work we do in the classroom.

We're not the only ones with stories, though. The "composition directed" materials that we bring into our classes also have stories about what the essay is, and those are linked to the cultures in which they were created. In the best of circumstances, composition teachers choose these materials because we like them – they "match" our ideas of what composition is or should be. But while this decision entails a certain amount of (explicit or implicit) evaluation on our part, that analysis doesn't generally extend to thinking about the connections between stories about what the essay is, and the contexts in which those stories are situated. As I've tried to demonstrate above, these things are always connected, and that's why it's important to look at them closely. What stories do these composition materials tell about what an essay is? What larger contexts – more appropriately, cultural narratives – might these stories reflect? And what might be the implications for students? This paper addresses these questions. However, rather than answer them by focusing exclusively on contemporary texts, I'm going to begin by looking at textbooks from the Progressive Era because I consider that period (around the turn of the

century) the departure point for contemporary education: these texts have had a remarkably powerful, relatively unacknowledged, influence on the way that we conceive stories about what an essay is today.

Tense Texts: Balancing Emphases

Just as there's a connection between the story about what an essay is in my course and the contexts in which I work, so one exists between the stories told in Progressive Era texts and the contexts in which they were written. So that the context is clear, it's important to briefly summarize it. The term "Progressive" (when applied to individuals) is used to refer to a group of social reformers active around the turn of the last century. Included in their ranks were educators (like John Dewey), social welfare workers (like Jane Addams) and journalists (like Lincoln Steffens). A core belief held by Progressive intellectuals was the belief that the survival of the nation was dependent on the achievement of a virtuous democracy. But while they believed that America was progressing toward the achievement of some version of this democracy, they also saw this achievement threatened by a number of factors. These included (and were closely related to) the disappearance of community, defined as groups of people sharing common values living together in one geographical area; the spread of mass communication like mass-circulation magazines, newspapers, and radio (which allowed for the formation of new non-geographically bound communities of people who shared common interpretations of mass communicated symbols); and the arrival of immigrants and migrants from the southern United States who brought with them new ideas and values to which northern, urban residents had been previously unexposed.

This threat is captured in a 1922 essay published by Progressive compositionist Fred Newton Scott, whose work will be discussed more extensively below. In "English Composition as a Mode of Behavior," Scott probed the causes of "errors in student English" (19). Underscoring his argument is a tenet later invoked by sociolinguists (in support of an entirely different argument) that language reflects culture, but here the argument is that the intrusion of

new cultures was interfering with the transmission of values reflected in "fine, good English" that were necessary for the perpetuation of the culture. Scott argued that two of the main causes of student errors in writing were rooted in the breakup of community during this period. These factors, which were seen as interfering with what Scott saw as the traditional transmission of values from parent to child through language, bode portentously for the nation because they also interfered with the transmission to students of cultural values reflected in the language and form of the essay. The first of these was "the influence of spoken foreign languages" (20). To illustrate the interference these languages caused, Scott harkened the image of an "English boy who is faced toward Oxford or Cambridge." This student, Scott argued, "is immersed in an atmosphere of cultivated speech If he comes in contact with English of the baser sort, . . . it is from the lips of persons who are felt to be inferior in speech as well as in social standing. When he goes to Harrow or Eton, he mingles with boys whose home influences are similar to his own" (21). For the student speaking "translation English," however, the language is "diverted from its normal course by the attractive or repulsive power of foreign idioms locked in the writer's mind" (21). These idioms, which reflect a different use of language and therefore different values, were one cause of this interference.

A second and more prevalent cause of error, according to Scott, was "the breaking up of . . . the family tradition." He cited three causes as most responsible for breaking up this tradition: "the Sunday newspaper, the telephone, and the automobile" (23). The introduction of these mass communication media into daily American life, he argued, interfered with the transmission of value/culture-laden language from parent to child, because they made possible access to other languages, reflecting other cultures. For instance, Scott charged that the newspaper "brought into the home smartness, slang, sensation, flippancy, and insincerity – qualities that are like poison to the body of our national speech" (22). Communication media, he said, interfered with communication within the family, which, according to Scott, "was a sort of bulwark against the forces which naturally tend to degrade and brutalize the vernacular" (22). Through such activities

as daily Scripture readings, "the earnest admonition of parents, couched frequently in conventional but nevertheless elevated language, the comparative isolation of thousands of homes, the absence of the lighter forms of literature, -- all of these and other influences tended to preserve in the family. . . a certain tone and choiceness and gravity of speech. . . " (22)

The implications of the distinction between "degraded speech" and "acceptable speech" made here are quite significant. Scott is clearly drawing a line between "family language" and language that is more acceptable in school (because it contains fewer errors); and "foreign language" or "media language," both of which are somehow qualitatively different than this other form of language. As Scott frames this distinction, the former language is (or is related to) Scott's own, and transmits values that are either explicitly or implicitly allied with (if not the same as) those of his own culture. The latter is a different language, transmitting different values. The question, then, is what are those values which Scott believed so important for the perpetuation and survival of his culture? In fact, as a Progressive reformer, Scott also seems to have embraced what have come to be known as Progressive values. For the nation to achieve the democratic goal discussed earlier, Progressives believed it was vitally important that all Americans embrace a common, if loosely defined, ideology. Broadly summarized, the most prominent characteristic of this ideology was engagement with a set of political and civil ideals stemming from the legacy of republicanism: commitment to the public good and the health of the nation; a belief in liberty so that all could be free to participate in public affairs; the creation of community, so that all would share an equal existence among others sharing and participating in the same commitments. Despite the dominance of this ideology, however, another characteristic of Progressivism was the belief that the virtuous democracy was always a step too far away, thus Progressives believed it was vitally important to bring others into the Progressive fold.[1] If they failed, the achievement of democracy might also fail.

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[1]This definition draws on one found in Russell Hanson, The Democratic Imagination (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1985), 60; 62-63.

Progressives like Scott had two solutions to the threats which they saw posed by the intrusion of other values into their culture, which they believed would impede the nation's progress toward a virtuous democracy because they prevented the transmission of *their* values from generation to generation. One was to provide people with information so that they could develop a sense of ownership in the burgeoning democracy, becoming active participant/problem-solvers in it. Here, the emphasis was on participation in a common set of values and goals that would lead to the achievement of what was seen as a common good. The other response was to emphasize the achievement of individual success and satisfaction. When everyone could participate in corporate capitalism equally, they would participate in this common culture. Once everyone could participate in corporate capitalism equally, individuals would be expected to focus on the vigorous pursuit of their own health and their own physical and spiritual development. For these reformers, a sense of individual satisfaction, which would indicate economic equality, would ensure the survival of the nation.

In order to examine how this Progressive culture shaped some of the most influential stories of what an essay is in Progressive scholarship, I'll focus on a few works by Scott, one of the period's most prolific authors. Composition historian Robert Connors has recently suggested that the work of Scott and other Progressive compositionists has had little consequence for contemporary composition, however I would argue that the opposite is true. In fact, the stories about what an essay is that serve as a backbone in Progressive composition have reappeared fairly consistently throughout twentieth century composition. They have been particularly influential for the last twenty to thirty years, as they intermingle with stories from expressivist scholarship. More importantly, the *tensions* inherent in the stories about what an essay remain with us, a source of great consternation that many of us face on a daily basis. For that reason, it becomes all the more important to examine what these stories are and how they reflected Progressive culture.

Perhaps the most significant story about what the essay is underscoring Progressive composition work comes from Scott's pedagogical scholarship. In essays like "English

Composition as a Mode of Behavior," cited earlier, Scott argues that mastery of the language and form of the essay are vital for the perpetuation of the nation's health and, ultimately, the survival and success of the democracy. This argument surfaces frequently in Scott's scholarship. In "Two Ideals of Composition Instruction," for instance, Scott argued that mastering the right sort of English was crucial for the survival of the nation. Language was the "the mode by which culture [is] imparted", he said. With "mastery of the mother tongue," therefore, came "the obligation to use this great instrument for the training and instruction of the souls of the citizens" ("Two Ideals" 44). Composition would become a place for "growth in power to do the world's work" ("A Substitute" 96). This work required building "character . . . moral courage, self-reliance, respect for the truth in every aspect, . . . sympathy for our fellow-beings and an active desire to help them and co-operate with them, a love of justice and fair play, belief in democratic institutions, [and] loyalty to our republic." ("A Substitute" 89). Clearly, Scott saw an intrinsic connection between the essay and the survival of the nation, and he argued that mastering the conventions associated with this form would bring with it assimilation of the values that he believed would ensure that survival.

But while Scott believed that doing this "world's work" required mastering the rules and conventions of the essay, the story he told about what an essay is also reflects his desire to make it a form that would facilitate students' "natural expression. Rather than "[clamp] down the lid of linguistic ritual" on the instinctive impulse to communicate ("English Composition" 26), Scott argued that the essay should capitalize on students' desires to communicate and find

> in the impulse to untrammeled communication . . . the vague beginnings of a sense for unity, for symmetry, for restraint, for proportion, and [attach] to these value feelings the simples aspects of the symbolic apparatus [of the essay]; and . . . [introduce] into the symbolic apparatus the ideas of sociability and quick communication belonging to the other phase, of which it is now usually devoid. (29)

Herein lies the tension in Scott's story about what the essay is. On the one hand, it was to be a document whose formal conventions reflected the values which he believed would see the nation through to the achievement of a democracy which he believed would provide a better life for all.

Yet, the values shaping what this democracy (and better life) would be were Progressive ones, and therefore clearly excluded some (like foreigners and fans of mass communicated media whom Scott disparaged in "Two Ideals of Composition Teaching"). On the other hand, Scott wanted the essay to be a form which would allow students to express their "natural" ideas in a "natural" way. What is never stated in conjunction with these calls for the essay to serve as a medium for "personal" expression, however, is what seems patently clear – that students first had to participate in the culture and values reflected in the form of the essay, thereby demonstrating their allegiance to those (Progressive) values, *before* their "personal expression" would be considered worthy.

The tension between these stories of what an essay should be is reflected in the introductions to several of the composition texts co-authored by Scott and Joseph Villiers Denney of Ohio State University. In *Elementary English Composition*, for example, they argue that "the various devices of grammar and rhetoric make an appeal to self-interest which students can understand. They will learn the mechanical and grammatical details of writing. . . and will acquire, through willing practice, one by one the necessary principles of discourse just as rapidly as they come to appreciate the value of these things to themselves as members of society" (iv). Similarly, *New Composition Rhetoric* suggests that

> Composition is regarded as a social act, and the student is therefore constantly led to think of himself as writing or speaking for a specific audience. Thus not mere expression but communication as well is made the business of composition. . . . The aim [of this textbook] is to keep the student's powers of construction and criticism in proper adjustment. While his chief purpose is to produce something readable, interesting, and perhaps valuable, he is led to consider questions of form at the same time (iii).

At the same time as these passages stress the importance of reproducing the essay's conventions, they also emphasize the benefits that will come to students if they participate in the values reflected in the conventions – not only the power of persuasion (among those reading essays produced by the student), but also the possibility for potentially meaningful self-expression.

The idea that an essay could both help students assimilate and participate in the values of the culture, while simultaneously reflecting their own interests and values, is also reflected in the exercises in Scott and Denney's textbooks. Some, for instance, asked students to write about their experiences with language through frameworks provided by the authors. But they were to express those individual experiences using the language and form of the essay:

> identify "what slang phrase . . . you hear or use most frequently. Think of the many senses in which it is used and try to find standard words for each sense." *(Elementary English Composition* 5).
>
> Without using the word *generous*, tell something that a friend did which shows that he, or she, is generous. (*EEC* 43)
>
> If you were talking about the high school to a friend in the lower grades who was thinking about leaving school, what would you tell him about high school life and work in order to interest him in keeping at his studies? (*EEC* 44)

Other exercises required that students filter their interpretations of various passages through language provided by the authors, requiring that students use the language in ways that demonstrated their participation in the culture. In *Paragraph Writing*, for instance, they ask:

> Why is the word "mysteries" (see dictionary) used in connection with fencing, dancing, music, and philosophy?
> Is it right to say "I should be glad if you will"? What word corresponding to should had better be used in place of will?
> Is the word "only" in exactly the right place in the sentence, "You only wish for prose?"
>
> Which of the following words describe the mental picture you make of him, and which apply better to your idea of [Moliere's character] M. Jourdain [subject of a vignette opening *Paragraph Writing*]? – tall, short, wiry, fat, bald, threadbare, active, alert, calm, impatient, pale, ruddy, sallow, stuff, demonstrative, spectacled. (2-3)

While these questions invite students to form and expand on their own particular interpretations of these passages, they do so within a prescribed range that facilitates students' movement from individual interpretation, to a use of language that indicates participation in broader cultural values reflected in the language.[2]

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[2] Although Scott and Denney's texts do not incorporate it, Scott's scholarship extended the story of what an essay is past this point. Once students demonstrated that they had assimilated the values reflected in the

The story about what the essay is in Scott's scholarship, and in Scott and Denney's composition textbooks, is a complex and potentially contradictory one. Certainly, a major component of this story is the idea that both language and form of the essay reflect values of the broader culture, and that assimilating and reproducing these values is essential for the perpetuation of that culture. Simultaneously, however, there is an argument here that broader stories about what an essay is must change in order to accommodate students' "natural impulses" toward communication. Despite this potential tension, however, it is important to emphasize that both of these stories are situated within a common, middle-class culture and reflect different aspects of it.

The problems associated with this tension might have been myriad for students. The composition of the classroom changed radically during this period. The children of those "foreign speakers" about whom Scott (and other Progressives) worried, as well as many others who had values different from those embraced by Progressives, entered school in numbers greater than ever before during this period. In fact, during the Progressive Era, differences between those embracing "traditional" American values (like Progressivism, with its roots in civic republicanism) stood in sharp contrast with a number of different and potentially competing value systems. Students in classes using Scott and Denney's textbooks (which, to my mind, represent the best and most cutting-edge Progressive Era composition scholarship) might find contradictory messages – that the essay is a place for their ideas, but that those ideas (and/or the form in which they were expressed) might not be *quite* right for the essay. Students thus might find it necessary to begin 'checking their cultures at the door' of the composition class, and find ways to demonstrate their allegiance to and participation in this different culture, with its different values.

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form of the essay and that these values were "aligned" (as Dewey might say) with the students' own, students moved from what Scott called the "lower rhetoric" to the "higher rhetoric." Here, students were permitted to adopt (and perhaps modify) some conventions of the essay for the purposes of their own self-expression. However, because they had already demonstrated that they participated in and could reproduce the values reflected in the conventions of the essay, this freedom to experiment was always predicated on.

Yet, if that was the case, how "individual" would the expression in their essays be? Further, what if they found it difficult to make this adjustment? These questions aren't new ones, particularly in the context of Progressive education. But they aren't often raised in association with Progressive composition, because that movement was seen (accurately, I would argue) as so liberating from what went before, and so pedagogically innovative. Yet, the tension in stories about what the essay is in these textbooks exists during this period, and has persisted into the current day.

Contemporary Textbooks

Today, there is still a tension here. On the one hand, the idea that there is a connection between the formal conventions of the essay and the perpetuation of a culture whose values are reflected in those conventions has become a prominent part of the story contemporary texts tell (or imply) about what an essay is. The culture – or "community," as it is more commonly called today – is different, of course. The rise of "discourse community" scholarship in speech and mass communication, side-by-side with (and reflected in) scholarship acknowledging that writers needed to participate in disciplinary conventions in order to be accepted as part of the academic community (expressed in articles like "Inventing the University", which in some senses is a poster piece for discourse community composition scholarship), are the clearest indications that "community" is not defined as the larger body politic, as it was in Scott's work, but is instead now more narrowly focused on the academic community. Participation in the community, then, means membership in this group. Thus, the implication in this work is that students need to master the disciplinary conventions associated with academic writing in order to demonstrate their understanding of and participation in academe, and that academic success is likely to be predicated on their success with this demonstration.

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and took place within, the boundaries established by those values. For more on the distinction between lower/higher rhetoric, see Scott, "Principles of Style."

On the other hand, the notion that the essay should serve as a vehicle for self-expression also remains with us. With the rise of expressivist scholarship and pedagogy in the 1960s and 1970s, the idea that composition was about helping students find what Donald Stewart called their "authentic voice" moved to the fore; however, even here there was an implicit and unstated assumption that students participated in the values reflected in the form of the essay *before* they encountered writing-as-individual-expression pedagogy. Nevertheless, the idea that the essay should somehow advance students' own interest remains an important part of the story of what an essay is told in contemporary texts, as well.

Although this tension in stories about what an essay is remains with us in contemporary composition, however, some contemporary texts treat the story differently than did Progressive books. Two approaches toward working with it are illustrated in the contemporary texts I'll examine here, Mary Lynch Kennedy, William Kennedy, and Hadley Smith's WAC rhetoric-reader *Writing in the Disciplines* (*WID*); and Gary Colombo, Bonnie Lisle, and Sandra Mano's *Frame Work* (*FW*). I want to suggest that the first approach, found in *WID*, is more closely aligned with the approach taken in Scott and Denney's texts, and might ultimately perpetuate problems associated with tension in the story of what an essay is in ways that might result in considerable difficulties for some students. But *FW* deals with this tension differently, seemingly trying to relieve it by defining what might be a more accessible story about what the essay is.

The story of what an essay is in *WID* becomes clear in the first section of the book, a lengthy rhetoric which lays out the essay's components and describes how to reproduce them in the disciplines included in the book (sciences, social sciences, and humanities). Early in the rhetoric, the authors make a clear distinction between two kinds of writing: personal/descriptive, and analytic. "[W]riters may use different composing styles depending on their purposes," they suggest. "A writer completing a complex history assignment may spend more time on prewriting activities – reading, underlining, and annotating the materials and taking notes – than a writer who is composing an essay that recalls prior knowledge or personal experience" (37). Although

they try to bring these two kinds of writing more closely together by defining ways that personal perception can inform analytic writing, their definitions of what an essay is nevertheless perpetuates the distinction between personal and academic writing found in this passage, which suggests that the twain rarely meet. For example, they suggest that personal experience can shape interpretation of academic texts and shape the writing that stems from this reading in assignments like this one:

> Select one of the readings on reproductive technology and write a three- to four-page response to the author's ideas. . . To react and respond to a text, you have to bring your personal experience and knowledge to bear on the topic in a pertinent way. You need to frame the author's message in your own context, to carry on a dialogue with the author, and to expand meaningfully on the author's ideas. Your reactions can take a number of forms. You may agree or disagree with an author's ideas, call them into question, express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with them, approve or disapprove of them, elaborate upon their consequences, or speculate about them. But you must take care to treat the authors fairly and represent their ideas accurately. (38)

But like the questions in Scott and Denney's book about "M. Jourdain," there is a clear distinction here between "your feelings on reproductive technology" and "your reactions to the author's ideas about reproductive technology." This assignment steers students to use their personal responses as a basis from which to enter into a "dialogue" with the author that demonstrates their participation in the values reflected in writing (and reading) conventions in a number of ways: they must arrive at some version of an accepted (or "preferred") reading of the text, "frame [that] message" in ways that illustrate their understanding of it to others, and take a position on it within distinct and identifiable boundaries established in the terms of the question. The point here is not to deny that students must do this in almost any class, reading, and/or writing assignment – of course they must. Rather, this example serves to illustrate the argument here that the tension between academic-writing-as-community-discourse and academic-writing-as-individual-expression is still very much present in *WID*.

Another way that *WID* tries to balance the tension between the essay as an outlet for individual expression and the essay as a site for participation in larger cultural/discourse

community values is by asking students to draw on their own perceptions about a particular topic (discussed in reading selections), just as Scott and Denney did when they asked students make connections between their own perceptions and readings. Here, these questions often take the form of assignments asking students to compare their situations to ones described in readings. Yet, as was the case with the earlier texts, the questions here assume that readers/students already participate in the culture (or discourse community) through which interpretations of the readings is filtered – the assignments don't ask student to consider *how* they interpret the readings and why; rather, they assume that students *do* understand the readings in the same ways that the authors, as representatives of a larger discourse community, understand them. They then ask students to build on those interpretation. This strategy is reflected in assignments like these:

> Write an essay in which you explain how your relationship with your mother is similar to or different from the types of mother-child relationships Hill Collins discusses in her piece. (384)

> Rubin gives a number of examples of people 'who are no longer so sure about what they really believe.' Even though they have unequivocal stated beliefs about issues like divorce, working mothers, homosexuality, premarital sex, and abortion, they become confused and uncertain when they have to deal with those issues in their own families. Have you experienced this ambivalence in your own family? Write a three- to four-page paper in response. (403)

As in the case of Scott and Denney's texts, however, the interpretation upon which the questions are predicated reflect the values of the academic culture, thus, the assumption is that students already participate in that culture when they arrive at the text. thus, *WID* ultimately perpetuates the tension inherent in the story about what an essay is found in Scott and Denney's books, written sixty to eighty years (and many paradigms) earlier. And just as those earlier stories might have produced problems for students during the Progressive Era, so the same difficulties might arise for students in today's classrooms. When the essay is presented as a forum for individual expression, but that expression is predicated on students participation in the culture reflected in and perpetuated by the essay, students not participating in that culture might ultimately be excluded from the essay. This is an enormous problem for those of working with students who

are perceived as being "on the margins" of the academy, because one of our primary concerns is with helping those students find their ways into academic culture, and changing that culture so that it includes a broader range of values. In fact, the stories about the essay is in *WID* and Progressive textbooks might leave room for that if put to a different use, however here they seem simply to perpetuate these problems.

But not all contemporary texts replicate the tension inherent in the story of what an essay is found in Progressive composition textbooks. In fact, composition as a discipline has recently been struggling with different approaches to this story. One is reflected in the basic writing/first year composition reader *Frameworks*. The story of what an essay is here is quite different than the one in the other texts discussed here. Where *WID* opens with a distinction between "personal" and "academic" writing, for instance, *FW* opens by problematizing this distinction. "Narrative writing," the authors say,

> is portrayed as personal and down-to-earth; it focuses on people, actions, evens, and objects; and it typically follows a straightforward time sequence. Narrative assignments range from no-brainers like how you spent your summer vacation to imaginative challenges like writing your own science fiction adventure. In short, narrative writing involves storytelling. Expository writing, by contrast, is typically seen as impersonal, abstract, and conceptual – serious academic stuff. . . . If you've survived writing assignments like these, you too may feel that narrative writing is fun and expository writing is hard work; that narrative taps your creativity while exposition requires rigor and discipline; that narrative belongs to you while exposition is strictly for teachers. (vii)

That's not necessarily accurate, these authors say. In fact, *FW* suggests that "personal writing," in the form of storytelling, is an intrinsic part of academic writing.

> [The] mystification of academic writing starts from the moment that we set it apart from the way we communicate our thoughts and feelings a hundred times a day. From the moment we wake up each morning until the moment we go to sleep each night, we all engaged in the oldest form of verbal communication: we tell stories. . . .
>
> Whether you know if or not, by the time you enter college you're already an expert storyteller. You bring with you a wealth of knowledge about what makes a story worth telling, how to shape an experience into story form, which stories are appropriate in which situations, and how to revise stories for different purposes and audiences. Unfortunately, many students also bring along a set of rigid expectations and assumptions about storytelling and academic writing. We tend to think of stories and storytelling either as child's play or as mindless entertainment.... The irony, as we'll see in greater

> detail later on, is that stories are the way that humans learn best. Storytelling is the basic tool we use for making sense of our world. (4-6)

Later, they go on to say that "Many professional academics write in styles and voices that are personal, down-to-earth, and at times even dramatic. . . . Trying to "sound educated" can cut you off from one of your greatest assets as a developing writer; when you mimic the abstract style that's commonly associated with academic writing, you lose touch with the many languages and voices that you already have at your disposal" (263). This is a much different story about what an essay is than the one found in *WID*, or in the earlier texts by Scott and Denney. Where those authors incorporate individual expression in the essay, they ultimately define it as something that is possible only *after* students master the formal conventions of the essay, thus demonstrating their participation in the values (and culture) reflected in those conventions. But *FW* doesn't position the conventions of the essay as the starting point for writing; instead, they suggest that students' experiences and voices are where writing begins. Rather than begin by discussing differences between writing about these experiences, and writing about "academic texts" as *WID* does (and which Scott and Denney's books imply), *FW* explains how these things are connected.

The assignments in *FW* also ask students to draw on the connections between their stories and other cultural narratives. Here's an assignment asking students to comment critically on a piece of reading:

> Write [an] ... essay in which you analyze the cause of a recent intergroup conflict in your community or on your campus. This conflict may focus on a specific incident or it may involve long-standing tensions between two social groups.... As part of your prewriting for this paper, you may want to do some informal research by reading news accounts or editorial on the conflict you're examining. In your essay you should offer a brief history of this conflict, including details about specific clashes or issues that have generated this tension. The primary purpose of your essay, however, is to explain the cause or causes of this conflict. Use Elliot Aronson's "The Causes of Prejudice" as your starting point – the point where you "enter the conversation" of ideas on this topic. Which of the four theories of prejudice that Aronson describes best accounts for the conflict? Which aspects of the conflict refuse to fit any of the theories Aronson presents? Can you think of alternative explanations?
>
> As you work on your paper, keep in mind that academic analysis is both critical and dialogical: you should feel free to "talk back" to Lips and Aronson. Don't hesitate to

> "think against" the explanations and interpretations they present in order to develop your own analysis. (481-482)

One difference between this assignment and the one from *WID* asking students to respond to reading is immediately evident: the one from *FW* is considerably longer. But the level of explanation in this assignment is also an indication of another difference that ultimately points to different stories of what the essay is that will stem from the assignments, which in turn underscores the conceptualization of the writing tasks outlined in the two texts. The assignment from *WID* invites students to "bring [their] personal experience and knowledge to bear on the topic [of the reading] in a pertinent way", but the authors provide little direction regarding how students might work this personal perspective into the response that they produce. (One might assume, therefore, that the authors assume students will *know* what this means and how to do it, because they participate in the values underscoring the assignment which serve to frame it.) Additionally, *WID* outlines a relatively constrictive range of options within which students might respond to the reading, each of which are contingent on the student first arriving at the "preferred" interpretation of the piece.

The *FW* assignment, however, is different. It presents students the opportunity to *begin* their response to a piece of reading by conducting their own investigation of an event, thus helping them to create a context in which to frame and present their responses to the reading. Additionally, the *FW* assignment presents students with the opportunity to do more than "disagree" with the author's ideas, as the *WID* assignment does: it also offers them the chance to speak as 'experts' on the topic and present alternative explanations to those presented in the reading. I would argue that one reason for the distinction between these two assignments lies in the different approach taken by the authors of *FW* to the distinction between writing-as-community discourse, and writing-as-individual-expression. Texts like *WID*, as well as Scott and Denney's books, seem to try to resolve this tension by allowing for individual expression within the context of the conventions of the academic essay. But they first assume that students

participate in these conventions and the values underscoring them. In *FW*, however, this distinction is seen as relatively artificial, and students' personal interpretations – their stories about what an essay is and what should be included in it – are seen as integral parts of a piece of writing.

The differences between texts like *WID* and *FW* are more than just skin-deep, as this paper has tried to demonstrate. In fact, stories about what an essay is in a textbook like *FW* reflect a broader sense of questioning in the field. What story about what an essay is should we teach, and how should we teach it? What is our role within the broader culture of the academy, and how can we balance our responsibilities to that role, and our responsibilities to students. The tension reflected in stories about what an essay is that run throughout Progressive material and texts like *WID* are echoed in these questions. It also resonates through recent scholarship – for instance, the enormous influence of Mary Louise Pratt's article, "The Art of the Contact Zone," is one manifestation of this tension – compositionists are finding that students are bringing different experiences and different literacies to academic writing. In Pratt-influenced analysis, academic writing and composition classes have become "contact zones" between these two different cultures, and part of their/our jobs as compositionists is to make this a meaningful space where personal experience is not completely subsumed within academic culture. But the argument here is that the tension at the center of pieces like "The Art of the Contact Zone" resonate in Progressive Era textbooks like Scott and Denney's, as well.

In addition to facing questions like the ones above, contemporary composition faces a dilemma with regard to the tension in stories about what an essay is. Is it possible to resolve this tension? Should it be resolved? Certainly, texts like *FW* demonstrate both that that within this tension there is possibility for enormously fruitful exploration of the relationship between student and academic literacies, and that there might be potential for resolution of the tension. However, the fact that it remains one of the central issues in composition scholarship and pedagogy (witness the enormous number of articles which rely on Pratt's contact zone for conceptual underpinning,

and the enormous numbers of readers/assignments/curricula designed around the "contact zone" metaphor) is a sure indication that it remains with us. In fact, it's a little like the elephant in the middle of the room. We're beyond the point where we don't acknowledge it – we can see it, touch it, talk about it. We just aren't quite sure how, or even if, we want to get it out.

I wish that I could provide persuasive answers to these questions, but the fact is that I'm also in the middle of them. Some days, I feel like they're fruitful and productive, that the tensions reflected in them (and that produce them) result in a charged and exciting atmosphere for teaching and learning in my courses. Other days, I wish that I could provide students with less complicated stories about what an essay is. But I can't – so instead, I tell them the story about what an essay is that I included at the beginning of this paper. At the very least, I figure I can help them understand the tensions that I see inherent in this text, and help them to work within and around them. At this point, that may be the best ending we can write.